

## Article

# The establishment (and disestablishment) of social work in Britain: The ambivalence of public recognition

by

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**Abstract**

This paper presents a brief history of the development of social work in Britain, exploring some of the tensions that derive from gaining public acceptance and social establishment. This is analysed using the psychoanalytic concepts of ambivalence and displacement. The locus that social work enjoys as part of the establishment is shown to be ambivalent. The establishment of social work as an accepted public face of welfare is critiqued, showing both the benefits of acceptance and problems that arise from seeking social approval. The positioning of contemporary social work as sacrifice will also be considered.

It is in the role of 'sacrifice' that social work maintains its public face – carrying away the transgressions of society and being loaded with guilt by society (displacement) – but sacrifice also offers a way forward to maintain professional integrity by walking alongside the marginalised, disadvantaged, stigmatised and social work, offering itself as an expiation on behalf of the people with whom social workers practise.

*Keywords:* social work, ambivalence, sacrifice, ritual, UK

## **Introduction**

This paper will present a brief history of the development of social work in Britain, exploring some of the conflicts that derive from gaining acceptability and establishment as a recognised and important element in the social organisation of contemporary society. These conflicts and tensions will be analysed using the psychoanalytic concept of ambivalence and the defence mechanism of displacement. This analysis will suggest that the locus social work enjoys as an embedded feature of the social establishment is ambivalent in its consequences for the profession. The institutionalisation of social work as an accepted public face of social welfare will be critiqued, showing both the benefits of acceptance and some of the problems that arise from being accorded social recognition and approval. The positioning of contemporary social work in Britain as sacrifice, seen as a necessity in countering some aspects of this social neurosis but also reinforcing it, will also be considered.

## **Background and context**

Perhaps one of the criteria identifying a European late modern civilised society concerns its commitment to the welfare, well-being and self-actualisation of its citizens. However, this represents a political statement, rather than a categorical position: one that oscillates between social change and social control, between care-giving and engineering well-being for capital. Questions of human rights and social justice represent a central part of social work's mission internationally, and these can stand in tension with politically sanctioned and socially approved welfare, as well as social regulatory functions. Seeking public recognition, we contend, is a 'dangerous' and ambiguous pursuit that must be approached with caution, knowledge and reflexivity.

Social work is embedded, both historically and politically, within British society. It is underpinned by policy and legislation and, since the inception of the welfare state in 1948, there have been varying degrees of entitlement to social work services understood tacitly as part of a Lockean social contract, in which government elects to protect people's property and well-being in exchange for people's engagement in that government's socio-political project (Locke, 1924/1690). As part of the state apparatus, social work runs the risk of being used or influenced by party politics, whilst its professional allegiance is political in another way in seeking social change,

justice and human rights. As we have noted, the two aspects may find themselves in conflict, which creates problems for social work's established position. Social work, as a constituent part of social welfare, also finds itself locked within a continuing debate of 'deservingness and undeservingness', depending on attitudes toward the social characteristics of its beneficiaries (Chung et al., 2018).

This ambiguity and ambivalence in respect of social work is important given the size of the profession in the UK. In England alone there are 96,497 registered social workers, the majority of whom are female (72.5%) (HCPC, 2018). The latest figures for children's social workers suggest there are approximately 30,670 in England as of 30 September 2017 (Department for Education, 2018), and 19,400 adult services social workers across the UK for the same period. This is a small percentage of the total population, about 0.175%, but is nonetheless significant in terms of public recognition of the importance of the role. However, if we are to understand contemporary social work in Britain and its place within the public psyche, we need to understand its history and development.

### **Historical development of social work in Britain**

There is a long history of welfare, charity and state involvement with impoverished, marginalised or vulnerable people in Britain. This involvement has been geared towards the twin goals of social regulation and functioning, and of social and political change. Sometimes these goals act in tandem, but not always, and throughout history there has existed the question of entitlement or eligibility – 'Who deserves what?'

The debate concerning the beginning of social work remains fluid, partly dependent on how social work is defined. Whilst social work was put on a clear statutory footing after the creation of the welfare state in 1948, it is generally recognised that it has a much longer history. The Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 marked a turn in legislation designed to 'manage' the poor. There was legislation that previously considered the treatment of paupers and the distinction between those who were able to work and those who were 'impotent', unable to take responsibility for their own welfare. A number of practices and welfare assumptions stem from the Poor Laws, which in some semblance remained until the creation of the welfare state almost 350 years

later. Firstly, the Poor Law of 1601 created a statutory approach to welfare or poor relief – the political domain. Secondly, it constructed systems of management, assessment and delivery – the administrative domain. Thirdly, it developed further the distinction between those who were ‘deserving’ and those who were ‘underserving’ – the moral domain. These three domains continue to manifest themselves in contemporary social work. They exert different forms of control, act in tension and tandem, and contribute to the public face and acceptability or otherwise of social work.

The Poor Law was recognised as flawed and expensive. Many attempts at reform were made, finally resulting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a deterrent-focused approach, based partly on the philosophies of Malthus, but also developing approaches to questions of freedom and utilitarianism. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 further embedded the system of poor relief as part of the state functions, supposedly separating out those who could not support themselves from those who could and should be encouraged to do so. A clear political assumption at this time was that poverty and personal difficulties were the result of individual failing and weakness, and therefore the responsibility of the individual rather than the state, something redolent of the individualism of neoliberal capitalism. There was no recognition in these approaches of structural factors leading to private distress. The public face of the Poor Law guardians and overseers was one of control and coercion, politically sanctioned administration of public moral assumptions. These functions presaged many incorporated into the public role of welfare and social work.

Alongside Poor Law developments that created a nascent social services system, mental health also came under the purview of the state. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century concerns about the rise of private madhouses, and a wish to ensure reasonable treatment of people with mental health problems, led to legislation requiring the building, staffing and regulation of County Asylums, which throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries created a mental health system akin to that which we have today (Porter, 2002; Scull, 2015). This was especially the case in respect of people detained in asylums; detention required magistrates and doctors signing such orders, often on the basis on recommendations from Overseers of the Poor Law. The Overseer became the Relieving Officer, the Mental Welfare Officer and, in the 1983 Mental Health Act, the

Approved Social Worker, replaced by the Approved Mental Health Professional in 2007 (Hargreaves, 2000; Dwyer, 2011). The history of psychiatry has changed from historiographic discourses to one inclusive of economic, political and structural factors (Turner et al., 2015), reflecting some of those changes seen within social work in general.

Not all developments in early British social work were state led. The work of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century acted in parallel to the Poor Law ideology of deserving and undeserving and individual responsibility. Taking a fiercely moral approach to social services, this charitable body augured case management, assessment and eligibility criteria. The first hospital almoner, Mary Stewart, began as an officer with the COS, and took social work assessment and eligibility criteria into the hospital setting (Cullen, 2013). There were also independent bodies acting from political and/or religious motives, such as Dr Barnado in child care, the Salvation Army in respect of temperance, the Probation Service and the Settlement Houses, which also added to social work's bifurcated development history as part of the state and irritant of the same (Briggs & Macartney, 1984; Payne, 2005). These diverse developments led to legislative change, thereby showing a desire to bring social services under control, in addition to helping regularise provision – the public face of welfare was a means of exerting social and political regulation and authority. However, this does not obviate social activism as the other side of social work.

In 1948 social work services were brought together in local authorities, although separated into three departments responsible for health, welfare and children (Spicker, 2014). This represented a profound change from disparate to coordinated care, from mixed to state provision; it heralded the beginning of state social work. There are many reasons for this shift, including a need to offset demands for revolution by mandated state care, the fall of the old social order after the Second World War and a renegotiated social contract alongside a tenacious chronology towards national approaches to care. This situation remained until reform arising from the report of the Seebohm Committee in 1968 that recommended the bringing together of the three areas of social work into unified social services departments, something which came into operation after the implementation of the Local Authority

Social Services Act of 1970. Generic social work, working across children and adult services, was born.

In practice, social work was not generic for long, with qualified social workers being drafted to undertake statutory child care work and a smaller number of social workers supported by a large number of unqualified workers practising with adults. A value-laden split was quick to develop between children's and adult social work and arguments in favour of and against specialising, which in one way or another have continued ever since (see Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). These have been supplemented by reports into the failings of social workers, predominantly in child care with inquiries into adult care failings being, generally, less reported in the press. These show the ambivalent aspects of social work in the minds of the public, alongside their ambivalent worth between adults and children. They have prompted calls for reform, often driven by shallow political populism, but also by the exigencies of reduced public spending, austerity and continuation of the philosophy of self-responsibility introduced by Thatcher's neoliberal New Right agenda.

Social work in the UK became a regulated profession under the Care Standards Act of 2000 s.61. In respect of the professions in the UK social work was a late entrant given its long history as part of the social and local government fabric of public service and protection, and its equally long history of education in the universities. This incorporation into the body of regulated professions happened at a time of devolution when the UK separated into its four constituent administrative and country parts, with each having its own monitoring, advisory and regulatory body. By that point, social work's history had shown it to be a recognised and established part of the social fabric accepted by the public.

### **Scapegoat and sacrificial profession**

In particular, tragedies from the 1970s to the 2000s led to public and political calls for reform, change and the blaming of social workers, although we can see the trend beginning from the Monckton inquiry report into the death of foster child Dennis O'Neill in 1945 (Home Office, 1945). However, reform, regulation and registration has been a double-edged sword, and led to increased political control and reduced capacity for political social work on behalf of human rights and social justice; it has

increased responsibilities for social control. This is clearly demonstrated in the calls for reform following the publication of the inquiry into the death of Peter Connelly (Baby P/Baby Peter) (Balls, 2008). This case concerned the death of a 17-month old who experienced more than 50 injuries. His mother, her boyfriend and his brother were convicted of allowing the death. Social workers, doctors and police officers had seen Peter and family 60 times in the eight months prior to his death. A serious case review (the official report into his death) concluded that all agencies were well-intentioned, but could have prevented his death and were flawed in practice. In media reports and public opinion it was the social workers who were blamed, rather than the police or medical profession. The case led to sweeping reform in the profession and in social work education. This, coupled with a change of government seeking to bring in austerity measures, bureaucratised practice and sought to control it, as we explore below (Jones, 2014; Shoesmith, 2016).

Following the direct use of this tragedy to serve political ends by the Conservative opposition and Labour Government of the time (Jones, 2014), and the public furore assisted by the media (*The Sun*, 2008; Shoesmith, 2016), a Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) (HM Government, 2010) was set up to undertake a route and branch review of social work from recruitment, through education and into professional practice at all levels. At the same time there was increasing recognition that monitoring and regulation alone would not make practice more effective, and that social workers needed to be able to exert professional judgements (Munro, 2011). So, social workers began to be seen as part of the problem to be managed and contained but also part of the solution to society's problems, albeit by those with the power to define them as such. The SWRB led to increased control over the selection and recruitment of social work students, what happens during their education, what they do in practice and through their continuing education (Social Work Reform Board, 2012). Effectively, this has corralled social work as part of the technologies of government, something that is seen within recent legislation for adults in the Care Act of 2014 and in respect of children and family social work in the Children and Social Work Act of 2017. Increased prescription and regulation has redefined social work, to an extent, as a safeguarding force that seeks, as Martin Davies (2007: 57) said, to 'oil the interpersonal wheels of the community'.



These changes not only reduced social work's capacity for striving for change, they also reinforced a culture of blame in social work. In terms of social work's public face, a further example from England shows this continued negative evaluation of practice alongside a positive portrayal of its social value.

In February 2018, a consultation was held on the development of a separate regulatory framework for social work in England. From 2001, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) had responsibility for the registration and regulation of social workers and approval of qualifying courses, but this was transferred in 2012 to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). This transfer of role aligned social work in an overt way with the health professions, thus suggesting its practice focused on individualised social work as a treatment of pathologies rather than considering the harmful effects of structural policy decisions such as austerity, or fighting for poverty reduction, equality opportunities and so on. This reinforced the unspoken, tacitly approved governmental redefinition of social work.

The government's political sense of social work is shown within the ministerial foreword to the consultation:

Social Work England's primary objective will be protection of the public. It will achieve its objective through setting professional, education and training standards for social workers, and providing assurance that those registered meet the standards, are qualified and remain fit to practise. Not only will this help to better protect the public, but by promoting public confidence and trust, it will also bring real benefits to the social workers up and down the country who work to support vulnerable children, adults and families. (DfE/DHSC, 2018, p. 4)

These words are not new. Instead, they refresh the idea that political control will prevent unruly and ill-educated social workers from doing harm, hence reinforcing a norm of regulation, control and anti-professionalism. The question we must ask is: 'How might we understand these assumptions and actions?'

In the mind of politicians and the general public social work is there to fix and mend society's ills, but also functions to carry society's sins away as a scapegoat, a vessel in which to pour hatred, loathing and blame. It is therefore both loved and hated at the same time – it is an ambivalent object in psychoanalytic terms (Freud, 1937). Because it arouses such strong emotions, in a paradoxical way, it keeps it in the

public agenda. We now turn to consider psychoanalytic concepts that may be helpful in exploring the social phenomenon of social work.

### **Psychoanalytic concepts and social work**

Early social work casework in Britain drew on psychoanalytic theories. Whilst such approaches have generally been developed or replaced, psychoanalytic concepts can be of use not only in understanding the dynamics of relationships in practice, but also in interpreting wider public reactions and responses to social work as a social practice. In this paper, we are using elements of Freud's psychoanalytic theory – specifically ambivalence - as a mode of social analysis. A quick overview of Freudian psychoanalytic thinking is useful at this point. Freud attempted to explain how internal motivations – the mind – effected behaviour. He suggested the mind had a conscious element, comprising those things we are aware of, and a subconscious aspect that contains thoughts and feeling we can access if we wish alongside an unconscious part made up of repressed feelings and thoughts. This is closely linked to our personality, which comprises three elements: the largely subconscious *id* containing our basic drives such as libido and aggression, and is guided by the pleasure principle; the *superego*, which is mainly conscious and seeks to inhibit the *id* and responds to external authorities and expectations, and the *ego*, which mediates between the *id*, the *superego* and the external world through the deployment of mental defence mechanisms. Imbalances in resolving these internal negotiations can lead to neuroses.

The concept of ambivalence in Freudian psychoanalytic terms represents a conflict between a continuing instinct and an internalised external prohibition of acting on that instinct (Freud, 1962). As a psychological fixation it is not easily resolved, as there is a constant desire to perform an act that is also, at the same time, detested. The positive and negative components of this emotional attitude 'are simultaneously in evidence and inseparable, and where they constitute a non-dialectical opposition which the subject, saying "yes" and "no" at the same time, is incapable of transcending' (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973 cited in Steinmetz, 2006, pp. 452-453). Abraham (1988/1927) extended this thinking through a sadistic fantasy associated with urinary and digestive functions, which moved from pre-ambivalence to post-ambivalent integrity.

Abraham's four-stage development of Freud's approach to ambivalence, albeit designed to apply to individuals, offers a way of approaching social work as a common and accepted social object, a professional institution. Abraham's model begins with a pre-ambivalent stage, which moves through a four-stage violent developmental journey related to consumption, digestion and expulsion:

- i. late oral stage – seeking total incorporation of the object (cannibalistic phase) – in our social analysis, representing a time at which government was seeking to incorporate social work into mainstream social functions;
- ii. anal-sadistic stage – seeking expulsion and destruction of the object – blaming, punishing and redefining social work in response to tragedies and public outcry;
- iii. late anal-sadistic stage - seeking conservation and dominance of social work – the subsequent reform and control of social work; and
- iv. genital phase of love towards a complete object (post-ambivalence) – a stage which has not yet been reached in respect of social work.

In such a view, social work's locus in society presents a social neurosis, in which assumed social constructions of 'good' and 'bad' in social work are in conflict. Once outlined, the individualised terminology has clear associations with the organisational context. Building on Abraham's extension of ambivalence, Freud sets ambivalence in the Oedipal complex as a reaction formation or displacement. The Oedipal complex represents a rite of passage, in which the 'son' seeks to displace his 'father' in terms of authority (in the original myth by killing him) - the positive force of social work being replaced by anger and blame for external events. On the other hand, Rosenzweig (1938) considers that the ambivalence rests with the stimulating object, rather than the responding subject (hence suggesting social work finds itself in a complex liminal position as part of society, but seeking to change that society), with the latter, the general public, possibly experiencing ambi-tendencies resulting from earlier repressed experiences with ambivalent objects, which leads to conflict.

Ambivalence can lead to displacement (*Verschiebung*) as a social defence mechanism by which society directs negative emotions aroused by tragedies or perceived transgressions of normative social order on to social workers or social

work as less threatening entities. The aim is to shift feelings on to this less threatening object (Freud, 1937), and to resolve internal conflicts. Any transgression of the social norms can elicit such displacement reactions, which, over time, lead to the diminution of social work and social workers through increased control and regulation. A different response is required for social work to grow positively.

Taking the argument a bit further, in Rosenzweig's (1938) analysis we may identify three ways in which ambivalence operates in social work. Firstly, as a part of government machinery, it operates as a *stimulating object* for the general public who have faced ambivalence in public institutions and governments, as well as in interpersonal relationships. However, social work, as a profession, also represents an *ambivalent object* that stimulates the general public who express hatred and loathing, whilst desiring the care and support offered by social workers when they or their families are in need. Thirdly, we can see that social work acts as a stimulating object for government who want to control a despised and costly object, which makes tragic mistakes, whilst also wanting to ensure people are treated with concern and helped, especially if this gains votes. These three faces of ambivalence can be exemplified using the case example of Peter Connelly (Baby P) we introduced earlier. We will add a fourth face of ambivalence: that of social workers themselves.

#### *Ambivalence and public institutions*

In parliament, the government of the day faced criticism from the opposition concerning the 'failures' in public services that led to the death of Peter (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2015). An unspoken assumption permeated this political attack, that those public services, and social work in particular, were in some way under the control and purview of the government, and therefore when tragedy occurred it was in itself a governmental failure.

There was a degree of ambivalence demonstrated in the actions of other public institutions and professions towards social work, notably the police. The inquiry report was released early to the opposition, in part to allay some of the concerns raised against police actions and to divert attention towards the failures of others (Jones, 2014). Professional ambivalence is seen in the necessity of working together as

professions to safeguard the public, but also in opposition when one's professional tribe is also under attack.

The general public also express ambivalence to governmental institutions and social work; being seen as one of these, attracts that unclear evaluation and distrust. In respect of Baby Peter's death, the government responded to accusations of public distrust by shifting the blame from the child's actual killers to the services that were involved, arguing there were missed opportunities, poor practice and poor education of social workers that led to this tragedy occurring. (This is shown again, albeit in a different way, in the distrust expressed in merging health and social care services (Henwood, 2018), seeing a closer integration as a potential means of cutting costs and increasing central control, rather than improving services.)

*Ambivalence – the public's love/hate relationship with social work*

When child abuse investigations and inquiries come to the attention of the public, generally through the media, ambivalence is clear. For instance, social workers involved in the Cleveland Inquiry (Butler-Sloss, 1988) and in the Orkney's ritual abuse allegations (Jenkins, 1992) became the objects of public hatred and disgust for removing children from their families, no doubt exposing the public to practices they would rather not see, and thus increasing that disgust as a way of coping with it (see Douglas, 1966). In the case of Maria Colwell, Jasmine Beckford, Kimberley Carlisle and the child central to our example, Peter Connelly, social workers were the object of disgust and hatred because they did not remove and protect the child. The popular newspaper, *The Sun*, campaigned openly for social workers to be sacked, gaining signatures in its petition and encouraging a public outpouring of vitriol against the social workers involved. Even the government minister, Ed Balls, joined in this clamour, resulting in the removal of the director of Children's Services, Sharon Shoesmith and the sacking of social workers in the borough (Balls, 2008; *The Sun*, 2008). The public display of 'bloodlust' acted to deflect attention from growing austerity measures, and also focused the blame on social workers, rather than the health and police services who had also been involved (although all three services were criticised in the inquiry report) (LSCB Haringey, 2009).

However, an alternative public relationship was also portrayed at the meeting of the Social Work Taskforce in December 2009. When the good work of social work was promoted and the singer 'Goldie', himself someone who had spent time in local authority care as a youngster, spoke passionately about the good social workers who helped him. The profession, facing a barrage of criticism, also looked for positive stories of social work, and adult social services were passionately championed by members of the general public who wanted to see such care available at a reasonable cost.

The ambivalence is seen in the public wanting social work services available where there is a need, but considering this to attract stigma would attempt to avoid personal connections with them. This is understandable, given where social workers practice – abusive, dangerous situations that reflect the dark side of human life.

#### *Governmental ambivalence about social work*

At the time the Peter Connelly inquiry was published the financial crisis had permeated governments across the world, the UK included. Whilst it is not suggested that the adoption of cost-cutting austerity measures and the retrenchment of public services had a direct impact on the government's response to the death of Peter Connelly, the indirect association is clear. Social work is a necessary part of the apparatus of modern government. It helps to regulate society, ensure the well-being of the workforce (potential, actual and past), and to protect members of the public from malign forces and anti-social elements, acting as a buffer to governmental blame.

Social work, however, is not just a desired profession for government; it is also demonised and detested because of its cost and its rebellious, uncontained nature which criticises government, and because it 'fails' to protect and safeguard all citizens all of the time.

This love/ hate relationship results in underfunding and blame, as well as a desire to control and direct so that the political gains can be made for government in supporting its citizens.

### *Social workers' ambivalence*

The direction of stimulation can be seen the other way too. Social workers, as the embodiment of social work, may feel ambivalent about their public face and political establishment. From one perspective, social workers cling to their privileged position as part of local government, whilst from another position they may actively campaign for social justice and human rights against their employers and organisations. The statutory role of social workers in child protection, mental health, adult safeguarding and assessment of need is something social workers draw on for their status and position as part of the human service professions. In this regard, social work provides a valuable and valued service for society. The unforeseen consequences of this role concern the increased prescription and regulation in practice that have channelled much of social work into a state function. In turn, this has the ambivalent potential to perform the state's wishes on the people, or to enjoin with an assumed social common good – protection, safeguarding and well-being.

Ambivalence, in a psychoanalytic sense, offers an explanatory framework for the two-sided face that society presents towards social work as an embedded social object and function. However, the expression of ambivalence need not be seen as a linear chronological process, but instead something that shifts and twists with context; it is threaded through history and can be cyclical or chaotic. We may question how this ambivalence can be resolved and what future lies ahead for social work.

Social work is both a loved and hated feature of society. It is blamed for tragedies, yet sought out when there are social and intrapersonal needs. At this level, a Kleinian approach to ambivalence may offer more than Abraham's Freudian model. When we recognise that ambivalence permeates social and intrapersonal life, which allows us to assess and evaluate, it provides the public with power. Introducing a positive aspect to the ambivalence debate, Klein (1975) allows for a dialectical interplay between opposite positions in resolving conflicts arising from ambivalence towards the object. This may offer a way forward in respect of social work. Weisbrode (2012) recognises that ambivalence pervades history through decision-making and choice taking. Razinsky (2016) concurs, stating that ambivalence is a central phenomenon of human life that is not fragmentary, confusing and paralysing, but is rational, creative and perceptive. State recognition for social work can be tempered by

relational methods embedded in human rights and social justice. At times, these rest on metaphorical, and sometimes actual, sacrificial acts by social workers.

### **Sacrifice, social work and the dialectic of ambivalence**

Ambivalence as a dialectic allows for a positive portrayal of sacrifice. As we have argued elsewhere, it is in the role of 'sacrifice' that social work maintains its public face – carrying away the transgressions of society and being loaded with guilt by society (displacement) (Parker, 2018). Sacrifice also offers a way forward to maintain professional integrity by walking in solidarity with marginalised, disadvantaged and stigmatised people - social work offering itself as an expiation on behalf of the people with whom social workers practise. Social workers are associated with sacrifice in two ways: sacrificial victims and martyrs in solidarity.

Even where there are no grounds for suggesting social workers did not respond to evidence of abuse, inquiries may tend to blame them for being over-optimistic and failing to challenge 'disguised compliance' as shown in the recent inquiry into the death of five-month old Eli Cox (Turner, 2018). The deep-seated need to create distance between 'them' and 'us' reflects the need for social work to assume blame and accept public anger.

#### *Social worker as sacrificial victim*

Social workers can be tainted by association with the contexts and lives of service users with a social 'wrong' and who through trial by media are required to offer a sacrifice – reputation, job, position – in this way the 'sins' of society are expiated.

Social workers, therefore, become much needed, yet ambivalent, instruments of society who can be sacrificed to maintain the social and political status quo or can be used by government to deflect attention from pressing social and structural problems.

Durkheim's (1912/2001) ideas concerning sacrifice, derived from the mourning rites of indigenous Australian peoples, saw profound sadness turn to anger and ritualised violence against oneself or specified others within that community. Using this metaphor alongside the ambivalent status of social work, we can understand the specified 'others' as those social workers who are sacrificed and vilified and loaded



with the guilt that the public may ascribe to government. Social workers, as part of the social system, represent a symbolic reminder of the social wrongs that have led to a public outcry. The public demand that social workers can and must carry these wrongs to mitigate them and salve the pain of society, and those who employ and regulate social work. It is part of their ambivalence.

Using our example of the death of Baby Peter, politicians and media piled the guilt for- and distress arising from this tragedy onto the social workers involved and then director of children's services, publicly rebuking them and highlighting their failings (Ball, 2009; Jones, 2014; Kettle, 2015; Shoesmith, 2016). This culminated in calls for punishment enacted by sackings, disciplinary hearings and public humiliation. The social workers were used, as a sacrifice, to deflect attention from government responsibilities whilst acting as a psycho-social defence against contagion by the 'feared other', the abusers – in this case Steven Barker and Tracey Connelly – who themselves were part of this society (Worrell, 2015). This scapegoat or sacrificial rite, however, does not offer support for those who require its services, but it underpins the ambivalent relationship the general public and government have with social work.

#### *Social worker as martyr in solidarity*

Social workers act in solidarity with those in emotional, social and spiritual distress by standing beside people and through this being associated with them. Social workers champion new understandings and promote the well-being of those oppressed groups with whom they work. By doing so, social workers offer the potential to resolve the ambivalent relationship by fostering new, shared and constructive approaches to social problems.

As a human rights and social justice-led profession, however, social work concerns resistance, resilience and hope, which also remove the assumed uncleanness of those people who are marginalised and oppressed in society. State-sponsored social work has been manoeuvred into becoming part of the problem rather than seeking to align itself with those in uncertain, insecure positions. Such a positioning accords well with social work values, but the insecurities of social workers as local government employees make this difficult to achieve. This represents one of the disadvantages of gaining public acceptance and face as a profession.

Durkheim indicated that grief intensifies when it is expressed collectively, and this act of ritual solidarity allows a transformation to take place which makes the mourned for a feared and 'othered' entity. Social work practice would see the facilitation of a collective response to people's need and/or oppression as necessary to effecting change. The mourned for entity is protection, safety and security, and a lost voice which is longed for but equally feared as demanding action and relational autonomy. This requires a transformatory rite to atone for the wrongdoing of the state, a sacrifice which social work, as part of the state social system, can provide alongside the people by exposing the wrongs done to the people and standing beside the people as they work together to change them. Durkheim goes further in suggesting the rite itself is seen to act to effect a change, working through the collective forces that it set in motion.

However, as we suggest elsewhere, it is important to avoid developing a mythology of the social worker as saviour, or to place faith in charisma and personality rather than a shared praxis (Parker, 2018).

Through this ritual, Robinson (2006) suggests that private identity is replaced by a collective identity. Social workers have a positive potential for change by walking in solidarity with this collective - the people whom society has pushed into the margins, into a liminal state. Acting collectively enhances human rights and social justice through adding a social work voice to those of the oppressed.

This act of solidarity attracts society's opprobrium whilst at the same time removing the stain of wrongdoing from society. The dialectic nature of the change in dialogue guards against such, suggesting that the new replaces the fixed and the tacitly accepted.

The rituals performed by social workers, including the sacrifices made, resonate with ambivalence. They represent both an abuse of a 'consumed object' and active technologies of resistance. Sacrifice offers hope of a way forward. If social workers remain part of the system their rituals simply assuage the guilt of those with power. If

social workers resist the status quo and stand alongside marginalised people, they have a chance to transform society and the lives of those with whom they practise.

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